

# Comparative Politics



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Source: *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Oct., 2006), pp. 1-20

Published by: Comparative Politics, Ph.D. Programs in Political Science, City University of New York

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20434018>

Accessed: 22-08-2017 02:12 UTC

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# Unbuilt Dams

## Seminal Events and Policy Change in China, Australia, and the United States

*Andrew C. Mertha and William R. Lowry*

Specific events can occasionally be described as turning points in the evolution of a particular public policy. Classic examples include the 1964 Civil Rights Act in American civil rights policy and the 1989 decision by Hungarian authorities to allow East Germans safe transit through Hungary into Austria, which culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall. Why do such seminal events occur? How comparable are explanations in very different political settings?

This article draws on the logic of expansion of the sphere of conflict to explain seminal events. The causal explanation of such events can be remarkably, almost eerily, similar, across political systems. To support the argument, Dujiangyan, China, where a large dam/hydropower complex already under construction was suddenly and dramatically aborted, will be compared to established seminal events in American and Australian environmental politics, the refusal to build dams in the Grand Canyon in the 1960s and the rejection of the Franklin Dam in Tasmania in 1983.

### **Theoretical Expectations**

Why do policies change? This question has inspired a wide range of expectations about how seminal events occur but much less on the cross-national comparability of explanations. Seminal events are events that generate shifts in the direction of a public policy. Theories of public policy change can help explain why and how seminal events occur, while retaining the parsimony to apply explanations to the widest possible range of cases.

**The Scope of Conflict** At the center of the explanation of seminal events is one of the most cited pieces of logic in political science, going back at least to the writings of Key and Schattschneider, but used by policy scholars ever since.<sup>1</sup> Stated most succinctly, policy outcomes can be changed by altering the scope of conflict over the issue in question. How does the scope of conflict change? Schattschneider makes this argument quite explicit: “the outcome of every conflict is determined by the extent to which the audience becomes involved in it.”<sup>2</sup> Second, participants in a conflict understand this

first proposition and act accordingly. Again citing Schattschneider: "The most important strategy of politics is concerned with the scope of conflict." Stated simply, those involved in a dispute can change the outcome by changing the sphere of conflict.<sup>3</sup>

**Variability in Expansion of the Sphere** Different perspectives on policy change and social movements can be used to posit the potential impact of variables on whether efforts to expand the scope of conflict are likely to succeed. Each of these variables is necessary, but none alone is sufficient to ensure seminal policy change.

First, policy entrepreneurs must be willing and able to initiate efforts to change long-standing policies. In Schattschneider's simplest example, each of the individuals engaged in a fight has the potential to act as an entrepreneur in recruiting allies to his cause or to take advantage of opportunities. Many policy analysts have described the essential role of entrepreneurs in alterations to traditional policies. Kingdon, for example, argues that policy entrepreneurs are always actively promoting new policy ideas, but they often have to wait for windows of opportunity that occur when different streams of problems, politics, and policies converge. In these windows, entrepreneurs can then invest "time, energy, reputation, and money" to push their ideas.<sup>4</sup> Some social movement scholars similarly describe how those seeking change are able to generate "insurgency" when political opportunities converge with the mobilization of resources and the sharing of important beliefs within the prochange community.<sup>5</sup>

Second, successful expansion of the sphere of conflict over an issue is likely to occur only when change proponents engage the media to alter the image of the issue. Baumgartner and Jones describe a policy process of punctuated equilibrium wherein policy remains fairly static until an issue is redefined or at least made more salient in a different way. For example, nuclear policy was altered when issues of safety and environmental damage became much more salient.<sup>6</sup> Image alteration is much more likely and widespread when large-scale media are involved. In Schattschneider's terms, the wider audience is brought into play in the conflict. Again, studies of social movements also posit an important role for the media in mobilizing collective action for change.<sup>7</sup> Thus, increased media attention makes expansion of the sphere to alter policy outcomes much more likely. However, this factor is not alone sufficient to achieve change. Even if the media become involved in a conflict, entrepreneurs must be there to use the media to push change, and those favoring change need an effective coalition to sustain momentum.

Third, expansion of the sphere does not lead to policy change unless advocates for change build effective coalitions to support their efforts. One of the dominant models of policy change is the advocacy coalition framework.<sup>8</sup> This framework describes a wide range of participants who can work together over long periods of time (a decade or more) to effectuate change. These coalitions include bureaucrats, politicians, and interest groups but also, according to Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, journalists and researchers who are receptive to new ideas and actors at all levels of government affecting the poli-

cy in question. The idea of a coalition, even if loosely connected, of actors in different sectors of society with some interest in common working together toward the same goal is consistent with recent social movement studies that emphasize group identities as shaped by some issue defining collective interests.<sup>9</sup> This article takes a liberal view of “coalitions,” one that includes government actors, media outlets, and a more diffuse “third estate.” Also, this term should be used carefully in the case of China, where nonofficial coalitions are viewed by the authorities with suspicion. Nevertheless, they do exist, even if ephemerally.<sup>10</sup> Such coalitions can involve actors at different levels of government, including those in the international community. Thus, successful expansion of the sphere to produce policy change is more likely when the prochange coalition grows to include a wide range of actors at all levels of government affecting the dispute in question.

**Comparability across Different Contexts** The expectations regarding successful expansion of the sphere to produce seminal policy change are generic to political context. Obviously, China can not be called a democracy, but it is somewhat less clear what it should be called. One of the subsidiary themes of this article is that China’s political processes vary by functional and spatial authority relations and by policy area. Thus, it can be argued that these processes approach several regime models simultaneously. For instance, one can credibly argue that China’s one child policy befits a totalitarian regime (although this term is often used with an inappropriate casualness with regard to China). One can look at government-business relations through corporatist, clientelist, or any other number of conceptual frameworks. By contrast, there are other, more pluralistic dimensions to the political process in China, such as the one examined here. To which of these models will the majority of China’s political processes eventually converge? There is some hope that the pluralistic/democratic path, while extremely unlikely in the short term, can nonetheless remain a potentially viable option in the future.

Therefore, while most studies concentrate on the U.S., their insights are not limited to the American system or even to democracies in general. Instead, successful alteration of policy spheres to induce significant change in any context is possible when efforts to do so involve willing and able entrepreneurs, increased media attention and corresponding image adjustment, and prochange coalitions with wide support, regardless of regime type. This contention may strike some as controversial, but the similarities of the cases examined here, combined with the lower degree of persuasiveness of regime-based alternative explanations, make the central argument stronger.

**Alternative Explanations** There are several potential alternative explanations that should be addressed at the outset. First, how can an event be defined as seminal? If only events that mark turning points in a public policy are identified, is not selection simply on the dependent variable? As is well-documented, there are numerous cases, particular-

ly in China, where widespread opposition had little or no effect on the ultimate outcome of a particular dam project. The Three Gorges and the Gezhouba dams are just two examples. Indeed, the conventional wisdom is that opposition will fail. Therefore, it is necessary to find empirical evidence to support the argument. By combining these cases with other, well-established ones, variation on the dependent variable can be demonstrated.<sup>11</sup> In addition to seminal cases, cases in the same policy area immediately preceding the seminal event will be discussed, with the focus on why some cases continued traditional behavior while others shifted it. Also, data will show distinct trends in a policy area before and after the seminal case.

Second, are these shifts in policy simply a result of a change in the preferences or personnel of elite leadership? The preferences of political leaders are not inconsequential, but they are better understood as responding to prochange forces. In all the cases described below, high-level political leaders were initially either agnostic or even antipathetic to the possible shift in policy. For example, in the case of the Three Gorges project, Premier Li Peng, who had staked his political career on the project, brooked no opposition. Similarly, the current leadership of Party Secretary Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao has staked its claims to their ability to bring economic prosperity to a greater number of ordinary Chinese. Toward this end, it is not unreasonable to assert that the “Go West” (*xibu da kaifa*) strategy of economic development in areas such as Dujiangyan is their Three Gorges. Thus, changes in the individual leadership at the top of the system lacks the persuasiveness that some may claim. Similarly, in both the U.S. and Australia the most important arbiters in the initial stages of the controversies supported continuing traditions of building dams rather than stopping them.

Third, are any of the posited independent variables alone sufficient for causal explanations? In other words, can these events be explained more parsimoniously with just one causal variable, for example, the presence or absence of a free press? Some may claim that the liberalization of the Chinese media is the principal independent variable of interest. However, empirically, the media in China suffer from the ideological pendulum swings that affect other important channels of political discourse. Moreover, in this case the media were a means through which the political processes were channeled. As it stands, the role of the media remains indeterminate as the primary independent variable. More to the point, when one of the posited variables was missing, as in the cases immediately preceding seminal events, traditional patterns of behavior persisted. Only when all three variables—effective entrepreneurs, engaged media, and effective coalitions—were present did fundamental change occur. Thus, one should be especially careful to avoid attaching too much significance to the role of the media as the sole or even primary explanation for these outcomes.

Finally, some may fault inclusion of the Dujiangyan case because of the historical resonance of the proposed site for the new Yangliuhu hydropower station. Dujiangyan is in this view a unique case. The historical record in China suggests otherwise. To use the

Three Gorges again as an example, by 2009 the dam will submerge scores of villages and historical sites as well as the Three Gorges themselves, subjects of Chinese art and literature for centuries. It is clear that cultural and historical continuity has been a low priority as Shanghai and Beijing lose more and more of their traditional neighborhoods to high-rises and shopping malls.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, simply the existence of a historical relic like Dujiangyan, no matter how important, does not by itself guarantee successful opposition.

## **Two Empirical Illustrations**

**The Grand Canyon Dams** For many scholars, the beginning of the modern American environmental movement can be traced to a dispute over dams in the Grand Canyon area in the 1960s. Massive structures such as Hoover Dam, built in the 1930s, convinced Americans that they could channel any waterway. Politicians eager to send construction money home, water and power interests eager to receive it, and agencies eager to spend it worked together to erect dams on rivers all over the country. This sub-government insulated dam building from outside interests for decades.<sup>13</sup> The proposal to build dams within miles of the Grand Canyon, however, produced a different outcome. As historian Marc Reisner states emphatically: "The battle over the Grand Canyon dams was the conservation movement's coming of age."<sup>14</sup>

The case has roots in the 1950s. Eager to control the meager water supplies in the arid West, dam builders in the 1950s proposed a series of dams on the Colorado Plateau. Environmental groups, notably the Sierra Club, mobilized in opposition, but they were not nearly as active or effective as they are today. David Brower of the Sierra Club and other environmental leaders agreed to allow the Bureau of Reclamation to build the Glen Canyon Dam at what is now Page, Arizona, in return for not building a structure at Echo Park in Utah. In theoretical terms, Brower and his colleagues realized that they did not yet have either the media attention or a strong enough coalition to fight the dam at Glen Canyon.

While Glen Canyon was being flooded behind the new dam, Brower and others swore never again to compromise with such proposals. Thus, when the bureau proposed two dams further downstream on the Colorado River in the area of the Grand Canyon in 1963, dam opponents mobilized. The challenge facing them should not be understated. The forces supporting existing priorities in water policy enjoyed power and influence at the highest levels of government, and decision makers were not initially receptive to an effort to stop the dam proposal.<sup>15</sup>

A number of factors converged to enable successful expansion of the sphere of conflict over the Grand Canyon dams to the national level. Brower and others took potential allies on float trips through the endangered canyons. They recruited prominent

spokespersons, such as the son of the famous Aldo Leopold. They used mathematicians and engineers to argue in Congressional hearings and other public forums that the bureau's arguments for building the dams were unjustified and the costs underestimated. Perhaps most important, dam opponents were able to use the national media to create a significant change in image regarding the proposal. Whereas any potential audience to the dispute had previously focused almost entirely on the potential benefits of the dams in terms of hydroelectric power generation and water storage for irrigation, critics publicized the costs to such a project. Not only would the dams be quite expensive in monetary terms, but they would severely affect a national treasure, the Grand Canyon. In making this argument, dam opponents could recall the lost beauty of nearby Glen Canyon and cite the magnificence of the Grand Canyon itself. In one famous full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, dam critics responded to bureau promises of greater access to the canyon walls by asking: "Should we also flood the Sistine Chapel so tourists can get nearer the ceiling?."

The reaction to these advertisements also helped the antidam forces. The day after the advertisements appeared, the Internal Revenue Service officially warned the Sierra Club that its tax-exempt status was being jeopardized. While the advertisements had appeared in only two newspapers, the apparent effort of the federal government to muzzle an organization defending the Grand Canyon "became front-page news across the country."<sup>16</sup> The impact of this action was consistent with the argument of some social movement scholars that laws and government actions can create an organizational constituency that [becomes] the basis of group identity.<sup>17</sup> The number of letters protesting the dams increased dramatically; membership in the Sierra Club soared; and numerous public figures came out against the dams. Publications as seemingly innocuous as the *Reader's Digest*, *Life*, and even *My Weekly Reader* criticized the proposal.<sup>18</sup>

In early 1967 federal authorities abandoned the Grand Canyon dam proposal. Opponents had successfully expanded the conflict to a national issue over a national treasure and, for the first time in American history, stopped such a massive dam project on the verge of construction. The impact on water policy was remarkable. Data on dam building in the U.S show that trends reversed in the 1960s. They increased each decade before then and dropped dramatically since.<sup>19</sup> Obviously, not all of this change can be attributed solely to the Grand Canyon controversy, but the case marked a true turning point. In her discussion of water policy, Espeland says: "For the first time, some began to see how ruthless the commodification of water had become."<sup>20</sup> Nash's definitive account of American environmentalism calls the decision not only "unprecedented" but also seminal in that it marked a whole new era in making decisions for "permanent" wilderness.<sup>21</sup> Even more, the case marked a change in policymaking regarding environmental issues. Environmental advocates and groups have since been willing to pursue a very aggressive approach in the political arena.

**The Franklin River Case** The Franklin River controversy in Australia displays many similarities to the Grand Canyon case. Perhaps most important, this dispute marked a turning point in national environmental policy. Prior to this controversy, most Australians were slow to embrace conservation or preservation goals, in large part because the economy is so dependent upon intensive use of lands. Further, dam building was viewed as an issue to be decided at the state level. Finally, because so much of Australia was already wild, most Australians expressed little enthusiasm about protection of natural places. These sentiments shifted dramatically in the early 1980s, largely as a result of the conflict over the Franklin River. As historian Philip Toyne says: "The campaign to save the Franklin remains the most famous environmental battle in our nation's history."<sup>22</sup>

The background of the Franklin conflict dates to the Lake Pedder controversy in the early 1970s. Lake Pedder was a mountain lake ecosystem in Tasmania that was flooded by a new dam in 1972. Reminiscent of Glen Canyon, some fledgling environmental groups, including the world's first Green party, opposed the dam, but to no avail. These groups enjoyed neither the media attention nor the resourceful coalition necessary to stop such a large water project. Further, opposition to most dam projects was relatively fruitless as political leaders welcomed them.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, those who bemoaned the loss of Lake Pedder vowed to fight further development of wilderness areas in Tasmania.

Thus, when the Tasmanian government's Hydro-Electric Commission proposed in 1979 a \$1.4 billion dam that would flood much of the Franklin and Gordon River canyons, the opposition mobilized. Led by entrepreneurs like Bob Brown, they formed the Tasmanian Wilderness Society, a coalition of interest groups that had opposed the Lake Pedder Dam. Brown's entrepreneurial role was so important that in 1984, the year after the conflict was resolved, he was chosen as Australian of the Year.

Similarly to the Grand Canyon controversy, dam opponents sought to expand the sphere of conflict by using the media to change the image of the issue. Brown and the coalition took actions such as leading float trips through the threatened canyons and publishing books and papers describing the natural beauty that would be lost by flooding. No longer was the issue simply one of hydropower benefits; it now also recognized the costs of lost natural heritage. The campaign was so effective that Tasmanian Premier Lowe offered a compromise solution of building a dam upstream on the Gordon River so that the Franklin could be spared. In a 1981 state referendum allowing a choice between the two dams, a stunning 45 percent of voters wrote "No dams" on their ballots. Nevertheless, in 1982 Robin Gray, a strong proponent of the dam, replaced Lowe as premier and termed the Franklin a "leech-ridden brown ditch." Again consistent with the U.S. case, those pursuing a change in traditional water policy priorities faced hostile opposition from important political leaders. Dam opponents persisted, however. They eventually expanded their coalition substantially so that it involved the greater public, all levels of Australian government, and the international community. By 1982 the



coalition included nearly 800 groups with half a million members. A nationwide poll of Australians showed 42 percent opposed to the dam while only 28 percent favored construction. Beginning in late 1982, dam opponents from all over the world joined in on a three-month long blockade of dam construction, disrupting the shipment of equipment and transport on access roads. The blockade attracted considerable media attention and inspired rallies of thousands of people throughout Australia, culminating in UNESCO's listing of much of Southwest Tasmania as a World Heritage area on December 14, 1982. The dispute went national when the federal Labor Party, led by Robert Hawke, campaigned on the promise that "the dam will not be built" and won election in 1983. The new Labor government immediately embraced the expansion of the issue to international dimensions by passing legislation prohibiting damage to World Heritage sites in Australia. Though the Tasmanian government protested the legislation as an intrusion on states rights, the high court ruled in favor of federal intervention.<sup>24</sup>

Many scholars of Australian environmental policy cite the Franklin River dispute as the event that gave birth to Australia's environmental movement.<sup>25</sup> Consistent with this interpretation, dam building in Australia peaked in the early 1980s and has declined ever since.<sup>26</sup> As with the U.S., all of this change can not be attributed to the Franklin River conflict. Nevertheless, environmental policy in Australia was never the same after it.

### **The Case of Dujiangyan**

Dujiangyan (formerly Guan, literally, irrigation) county is the site of one of the world's most extraordinary premodern marvels of construction, the Dujiangyan Irrigation Project. Constructed more than 2,250 years ago, it presents a combination of technological expertise, environmental sensitivity, and engineering prowess that serves the same functions today as it did during the time of the Roman Empire.

The Dujiangyan Irrigation Project, completed in 251 B.C., was a response to the unpredictability of the Min River, which tended to overflow and flood Sichuan's otherwise fertile agricultural basin. In 276 B.C. the project was initiated under the authority of Li Bin, the governor of Sichuan Province, to provide flood control as well as irrigation for the Chengdu Plain. The project itself can best be described as an attempt not to change the natural contours of the region's topography, but rather to enhance them by employing sluice gates and ditches to use the Inner River for irrigation and the Outer River for flood control.<sup>27</sup>

Despite this rich history and cultural symbolism, actions in the early years of the twenty-first century endangered the site. In May 2001 Chinese engineers began building a dam and reservoir at Zipingpu, seven kilometers upstream from Dujiangyan. Zipingpu is one of China's "Ten Key Projects" currently underway to increase

hydropower and provide water to its growing urban population and to assist in the economic development of the western part of China more generally. A massive undertaking with a reported investment of 6.2 billion RMB (\$751 million USD), the Zipingpu project has been engineered to meet the Chinese triumvirate of goals for large dam-building projects: hydropower, irrigation, and flood control.

Although not entirely free of controversy, the Zipingpu project did not elicit much opposition. However, by early 2003 this situation changed. The first indication came when the silt that had been removed from Zipingpu began to accumulate at a site literally a stone's throw from the uppermost part of the Dujiangyan Irrigation Project, an area called Yuzui (fish mouth). Although the actual reason for this accumulation is shrouded in secrecy, many local officials feared that such silt removal from Zipingpu and its placement at Yangliuhu signaled the construction of an additional hydropower station at Yangliuhu. According to local Dujiangyan officials, the transfer of silt from Zipingpu to Yangliuhu occurred before any such appraisal of the Yangliuhu project was made available to them and was, in their opinion, an "illegal act."<sup>28</sup> This apparent secrecy is consistent with the notion that Yangliuhu proponents sought to present the Dujiangyan government with a *fait accompli*. The Yangliuhu dam, if built, would be located only 1,300 meters from the Yuzui section of Dujiangyan, with its waters coming as close as 350 meters to Yuzui. The Yangliuhu project was touted as a necessary part of the Zipingpu hydropower project once plans became public and opposition began to mount. By April 8 preparations were complete, and the decision was made to move forward with the project.<sup>29</sup>

Once details of the project started to leak, however, the response was swift, overwhelming, and negative. On April 28 the Dujiangyan Management Bureau convened a meeting of government representatives, engineers, and other experts to discuss the Yangliuhu project. Ironically, it was at this conference that the opposition's talking points were crystallized. First, the project would negatively affect the diverse ecosystem of the Dujiangyan area, making the Dujiangyan Irrigation Project obsolete and effectively destroying a World Heritage site, one deeply embedded within the Chinese psyche. Because of its proximity to the Dujiangyan project, it would create "vision pollution" (*shijue wuran*) and would rob the Dujiangyan government of much-needed revenue. Dujiangyan does not have industries of its own, and Dujiangyan officials concede that unemployment was quite high. Yet the Dujiangyan government was recently upgraded a half step in administrative rank, from a county (*xian*) to a county-level municipality (*xian ji shi*). This upgrading was a result of Dujiangyan's economic development, which could only have been a result of its tourism trade. Thus, there was a significant financial stake in the protection of this World Heritage site.

Second, because the Dujiangyan Irrigation Project continues its two thousand year old functions of flood control and irrigation, Yangliuhu would negatively affect the entire Sichuan Basin and the agricultural output of Sichuan Province more generally.

Finally, Yangliuhu went against many organizational interests of Dujiangyan's

bureaucratic units and appeared to go against the Environmental Protection and the Cultural Relics laws, as well as other laws and regulations, including the Sichuan Provincial Regulations for the Protection of World Heritage Sites.

Opponents framed the issue shrewdly, anticipating the positions to be taken by supporters of the project as well as playing to the biases of undecided decision makers. One of the arguments underscored the “folly of blindly following the West” in building massive dams. Others argued that such a project could last only 100–200 years before silt accumulation would make the dam inoperable.

On June 5, 2003, proponents of the Yangliuhu project sponsored another conference, during which it was announced that the project would nevertheless move forward. In response, the Dujiangyan World Heritage Office appealed to the Sichuan Provincial Construction Bureau, which sided with the opponents of the project.<sup>30</sup> But some units at the provincial level still leaned in favor of the project. A second front was needed.

By this time, an important back channel had been opened. Attending the conference was an editor of the state-run newspaper, *China Youth Daily*, Wang Jinglin.<sup>31</sup> Wang was intensely interested in environmental issues and in the Dujiangyan case in particular. While in Dujiangyan, she was pulled aside by officials from the Dujiangyan World Heritage Office and told that this was a big story and that she should contact the World Heritage Office offices in Beijing. Upon returning to Beijing, she sought out the World Heritage Office staffers but found them reluctant to rock the boat. Instead, they suggested that she do so by writing an article about the controversy.

In the case of the Dujiangyan World Heritage Office no such fear existed. They “recruited” Wang Jinglin and carefully laid out the issues at stake. Wang spent more than three weeks carefully researching the article before publishing it in *China Youth*. Her article framed the issue not in terms of economic development (a hitherto irresistible line of argument), but rather as an attack on China’s own cultural heritage.

This article opened the floodgates. Other actors got involved, locally and nationally. On June 27, 2003, Bian Zaibin, the Director of the Dujiangyan Municipal Cultural Relics Bureau, began his own effort to mobilize the press. Together with the provincial government, he issued a report to UNESCO. Less than three weeks later, the Standing Committee of the Dujiangyan Municipal Party Committee decided that “the relevant units are all in agreement, on the basis of the law and reflected in the superior bureaucratic units, we can not sacrifice a more than 2,250-year-old construction project so that a single electricity station can be built on the river”<sup>32</sup>

In July and August, Bian gave interviews to the Guangdong-based *Southern Weekend*, a paper noted for its zeal in airing the government’s dirty laundry. He worked together with the Sichuan Provincial Cable Station as well as with the Chengdu Municipal Broadcasting Station and local publications. Bian also contacted media outlets throughout the country. From July through September, by his count, “more than one hundred” newspapers and internet outlets descended on Dujiangyan

to interview him. He cleverly couched his opposition: “should we sacrifice the heritage of the people and the world to the interests of ‘some departments’?”<sup>33</sup>

Authorities in Beijing and in the provincial capital in Chengdu were monitoring these developments. On August 28, 2003, the final, fateful decision came down that the Yangliuhu Project was to be abandoned. According to several experts, for the first time in the history of the People’s Republic of China a decision on an engineering project of such magnitude—a decision that had already been reached—was reversed. No less noteworthy, resistance on the part of local officials and experts and the mobilization of the media formed the critical core of the opposition and the larger contours of the debate. This outcome is very much in contrast to the dam-building projects of the 1980s in China and, indeed, to much of the political process in China today.<sup>34</sup>

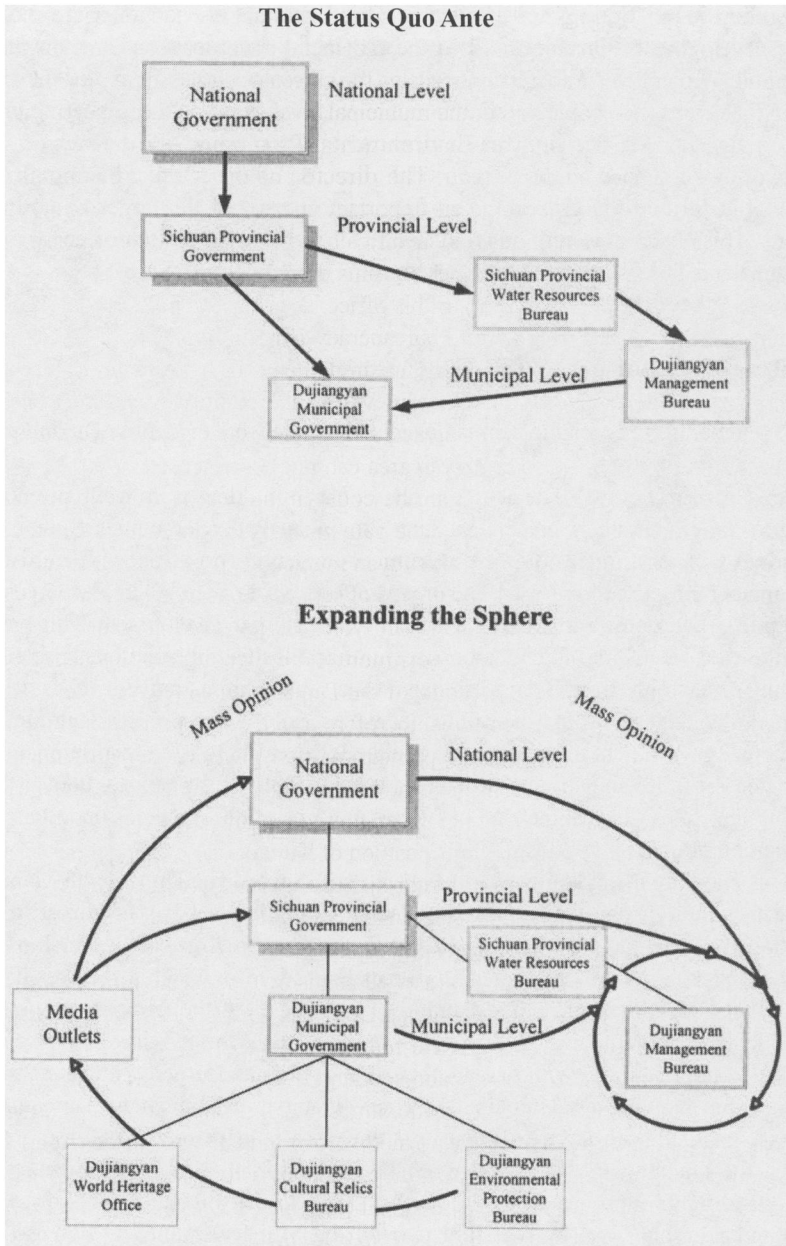
### **Analysis of the Dujiangyan Case**

Three elements are crucial to seminal events. All three were evident in Dujiangyan.

**Policy Entrepreneurs** The actors in favor of dam building were well-entrenched. On the pro-Yangliuhu side were the Sichuan Provincial Water Resources Bureau and the Huadian Corporation (a jointly government-owned corporation with ministerial or provincial rank). (See Figure 1.) The organizational goal of the Water Resources Bureau is to utilize hydropower to contribute to China’s economic development. This bureaucracy, like most in China, is based on decentralized leadership relations. It can receive binding orders only from the government at the same administrative level on which it is located. As such, it ordinarily would not have been able to pressure the Dujiangyan municipal government in the way that it did. However, there is an institutional anomaly in the case of Dujiangyan that provides a crucial piece of the puzzle, both in terms of raising the controversy in the first place and in terms of the strategies undertaken by the opposition ultimately to prevail.

This anomaly is the Dujiangyan Management Bureau. The Dujiangyan Management Bureau, although physically placed in Dujiangyan, actually has no direct leadership relations with the Dujiangyan government. Instead, it has “vertical” leadership relations with the Sichuan Provincial Water Resources Bureau, from which it receives its budget, personnel allocations, and other operating necessities.<sup>35</sup> Although it is officially at the same level as the Dujiangyan Water Resources Bureau, the two have only nonbinding “professional relations” with one another. The latter is concerned with small-scale projects within Dujiangyan Municipality. The Dujiangyan Management Bureau, by contrast, is charged with large-scale projects and with management of all the areas from which the Dujiangyan discharged water (Leshan and Emei municipalities). It is clear that the Yangliuhu project would allow this office to consolidate this control in a very real and tangible way (by wresting it from the Min River and, by extension, from

Figure 1 Expanding the Sphere in the Dujiangyan Case



Dujiangyan). Thus, it makes sense that such a coordinating body should have direct provincial access. But it also represents a real nexus for conflict between the provincial government and Dujiangyan.<sup>36</sup> This nexus has historical roots. The original builder of the Dujiangyan Irrigation Works was the provincial governor. Thus, provincial control over Dujiangyan and its tributaries predates the current regime by a very long time.<sup>37</sup>

Those opposed to Yangliuhu at the municipal level included the Dujiangyan Cultural Relics Bureau, the Dujiangyan Environmental Protection Administration, and the Dujiangyan Seismological Bureau. The director of the Cultural Relics Bureau in Dujiangyan, Bian Zaibin, became an important entrepreneur in this case. It is unclear what his own political ambitions are, specifically with regard to his own promotion outside of the culture bureaucracy. However, if his preferences are viewed through the narrow lens of the organizational goals of his office, a substantial portion of his actions can be understood. Although the culture bureaucracy is not a weak player in Chinese politics, Yangliuhu provided an opportunity to strengthen it or to maintain its strength. (Or, perhaps more accurately, the failure to prevail in the controversy could be taken as a weakening of the Cultural Relics Bureau.) Objectively, the negative effect of Yangliuhu on the cultural relics of the Dujiangyan area can not be overstated. It arguably provided important political insulation for Bian; he could argue that he would be remiss in his duties as director if he did not oppose the dam with vigor. Moreover, since his immediate superior in this regard was the Dujiangyan municipal government, who also opposed the project, Bian could rely on some degree of support from his superiors.

Another key player was the Dujiangyan World Heritage Office, a unit directly under the control of the Dujiangyan government. The director of this office is Deng Chongzhu, who is the retired secretary of the Dujiangyan Municipal Party Committee (*Dujiangyan shiwei shuji*) and who is, therefore, more powerful than his title suggests. Deng also became a key policy entrepreneur. At first glance, Deng does not seem particularly powerful. Retired from government, he has been placed at the head of the Dujiangyan World Heritage Office in an attempt to put him out to pasture on the road to retirement. However, Deng's previous position of Dujiangyan party secretary is the most powerful position in Dujiangyan. During his tenure as party secretary, Deng cultivated relationships with an array of officials inside and outside Dujiangyan, but there is no higher office to which he can conceivably aspire. He can therefore afford to accept risks in pursuing the agenda of his office (as well as his own personal agenda) of preserving Dujiangyan. A highly articulate individual, Deng has been tireless in his efforts to maintain focus on the Yangliuhu issue. He may provide a cautionary note to those who believe that appointment of retired cadres to largely symbolic or ceremonial positions is an effective way of removing them from politics.

Other important actors were activist members of the Chinese media. Apart from any environmentalist leanings on their part, the Yangliuhu issue was such a good story that it could not be easily ignored by professional journalists. These sources included more traditional government mouthpieces like *China Youth Daily* and even the *People's Daily*.

In particular, Wang Jinglin was a key entrepreneur for change. On the one hand, she is an editor of a government mouthpiece, the *China Youth Daily*. On the other hand, she has gone on record several times as being strongly proenvironment. She can use her newspaper as a bully pulpit to make her concerns widely known. Why has she been allowed to function in this way without being gagged the way other (indeed, better protected) activists like Dai Qing have? Part of the answer has to do with timing. However, another part of the story may be that the proverbial other shoe has not yet dropped. Wang may have emerged unscathed from the Yangliuhu controversy, but it remains to be seen if she can weather other issues of dam politics, in particular the Nu River and Tiger Leaping Gorge projects in Yunnan, about which she has written extensively.

Other actors with the potential to affect the outcome were less consequential. International governmental organizations such as UNESCO played an ambiguous role in the process, more as passive symbols than active participants. In addition, the Sichuan provincial government and the national authorities in Beijing appear to have been either ambivalent or agnostic about the project. Finally, the public at large played an important role as “consumers” of the debate. Because Dujiangyan plays such a prominent role in the Chinese self-image, it was comparatively easy to mobilize, or was anticipated by the ultimate decision makers as being so.

As for the dog that did not bark (at least, not very loudly), the Environment Protection Administration bureaucracy was active in the process, but not as much as one would expect, because Yangliuhu appeared to present a clearer and more present danger to the cultural landscape of Dujiangyan. The State Environmental Protection Administration learned from this experience. Much of the reason why it has become increasingly proactive with regard to the ongoing Nu River controversy in Yunnan is because of the lessons learned from Dujiangyan. Deputy Director Pan Yue is already known as somewhat of a media hound, as well as a strong advocate for environmental preservation, and he has been able to leverage his agency’s relative organizational weakness by carefully cultivating and establishing strong networks with the media, as the temporary halt of thirty infrastructure projects that, like Yangliuhu, had not filed the project assessments in early 2005 indicates.<sup>38</sup>

**Using the Media to Change the Policy Image** Because of its similarities with the U.S. and Australia, Dujiangyan suggests that a seminal event may have occurred. Talk of developing China’s western regions has a long history, and the western regions are one of the most important development priorities of the Chinese state under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao. Hydropower is a critical component of development strategy. As an important government program and as a party line, development policy would seem to be particularly immune to change. It is as close to an equilibrium as one can get in Chinese politics.

How can such an equilibrium be punctuated? Existing environmental concerns played a necessary, but far from sufficient, role in the decision to abandon Yangliuhu.

Rather, a more subtle but more salient and determining factor was the framing of the debate around the notion that Dujiangyan is a World Heritage Site. Moreover, not only is it a World Heritage Site, which is a source of pride for China and the Chinese, but this designation is an independent (external, international) acknowledgment that Dujiangyan is a central, symbolic part of China's cultural heritage and Chinese identity. Like the terracotta warriors in Xi'an and the Great Wall, Dujiangyan was a project initiated by the first Qin emperor, who had unified China, and is at the root of what contemporary Chinese understand their heritage to be. Only by mobilizing these elements of Dujiangyan was the opposition able to punctuate the seemingly immovable equilibrium of western development in China. The opposition's political strategy was brilliant, but it came with no guarantees. Other important aspects of China's cultural heritage have been lost with little substantive debate beforehand. How did those favoring change alter the image in this policy area? Consistent with the theoretical perspectives offered by Schattschneider, Kingdon, Campbell, Baumgartner and Jones, and others, several factors converged in the Yangliuhu case.

The first involved the bifurcation of official and unofficial views of the various government officials directly involved in the controversy. In some previous dam controversies, particularly the massive Three Gorges Project, the list of opponents was long and distinguished, yet they were unable to broaden the debate (and in some cases were punished for espousing such views).<sup>39</sup> In Yangliuhu, by contrast, local and national officials, understanding that their official positions prevented them from articulating personal points of view, as well as critical hard data, communicated or leaked this information to the press in order to break the monopoly on information held by government agencies that supported the project.

Second, post-1949 politics in China, especially during the reform era, can be called a history of experiments in decentralization. In one interpretation, Deng Xiaoping was able to push through his reform program in 1979 only by playing to the provinces (that is, bypassing truculent officials in Beijing by packing the central committee with local actors, a tactic also used by Mao). In Yangliuhu, this dynamic is similar, with one significant difference: the direction of such appeals. The dynamic was not top-down but rather bottom-out. Concentrations of power in favor of Yangliuhu at middle, provincial/ministry, administrative levels were surrounded by a loose, decentralized opposition coalition.

Obviously, the media were an important mechanism in this regard. Dujiangyan officials provided the data to the media, and the media were happy to run such a compelling story. How was this arrangement possible? First media outlets have proliferated in China; individual newspapers and periodicals currently number in the thousands. This growth has been accompanied by the marketization of such previously labeled "thought work." Made to fund themselves, media outlets can not hope to lure advertisers while promoting ideologically laden but otherwise empty stories.<sup>40</sup> Rather, they must appeal



to Chinese consumers, who, like those elsewhere, tend to prefer racier stuff. Of course, such progress is not exactly linear. Nevertheless, it has become increasingly difficult for the authorities to control the press, especially when a story appears that is as newsworthy as this one and that appeals to the type of cultural nationalism ironically kindled by the current leadership as a substitute to socialism.

**Support for Policy Change** In Dujiangyan, as in the Grand Canyon and Franklin River, dam opponents were able to build an effective coalition supporting their position. According to the advocacy coalition framework approach, explanations of effective coalitions must go beyond specific interest groups or even government institutions. Instead, potential coalitions of activists and interest groups also “include actors at various levels of government active in policy formulation and implementation as well as journalists, researchers, and policy analysts who play important roles in the generation, dissemination, and evaluation of policy ideas.”<sup>41</sup>

Consistent with this proposition, the antidam coalition at Dujiangyan grew to include, not just activists and bureaucrats, but also scholars and journalists. Though they did not think in explicit terms of building a coalition, the officials in the Dujiangyan municipal offices and the World Heritage Office sought and used support from many sectors. Certainly, the scholars who described damage to the Dujiangyan ecosystem from the Zipingpu project in their official studies provided ammunition for the initial opponents of the Yangliuhu Dam. Journalists, notably Wang Jinglin, were crucial in expanding the sphere of conflict over the issue to the larger public.

Further, again consistent with advocacy coalition framework arguments, the antidam coalition cut across vertical lines of government to include actors at all relevant levels. Early critics of the Yangliuhu proposal in Dujiangyan offices may be described on an organization chart as holding offices at local levels of government. But their supporters grew to include provincial officials (notably the Sichuan Bureau of Construction), national policymakers who ultimately pulled the plug on the project, and even (albeit implicitly) the larger domestic audience concerned with damage to a World Heritage site. The World Heritage system (*xitong*) is made up of two parts, neither of which can be accurately described as a nongovernmental organization. The United Nations Education and Science Commission (UNESCO) is housed in the ministry of education in Beijing. However, each of China's thirty World Heritage sites has its own office, and there is very little uniformity within this system. Their host units differ from region to region, as do their administrative rank and relationship to the local government in which the site is physically located. The former type is an international governmental organization and not a nongovernmental organization, while the latter is a Chinese government agency.

Indeed, the domestic world heritage offices in China, particularly in Dujiangyan, are far more likely to accept risk, while international governmental organizations like

UNESCO tend to be extremely risk-averse. In the case of the latter there is a genuine and well-founded fear of becoming too activist in the eyes of Beijing, and they are acutely aware of their relative powerlessness. They tend to walk extremely softly, picking their fights and their tactics with extreme caution. Wang Jinglin received their unofficial blessing, but little else. However, both Wang and the Dujiangyan government knew exactly how to use the World Heritage designation to leverage the national government. They never overshot, but they were able to achieve with Dujiangyan's World Heritage designation what UNESCO could not. This subtle but powerful lever ultimately provided an important argument for stopping the Yangliuhu project. The opposition was not a transnational movement, but rather a domestic movement that adeptly utilized international symbols and related expectations on the part of the national authorities.

Finally, the bureaucratic structure, specifically that of the Dujiangyan Management Bureau, facilitated its own defeat by this growing momentum of public opinion and its own isolation. Although it is unclear to what degree they acted with a concrete and deliberate strategy, the Yangliuhu opponents found their target not as a constellation of provincial actors that were united in their support for the project, but rather as a loose confederation of government offices with diverse opinions regarding the controversy. The bureaucratic structure of the Dujiangyan Management Bureau is at the center of this process.

Because the Dujiangyan Management Bureau is an office located at the municipal but managed at the provincial level, it had the resources and potential political power to bully the units within the Dujiangyan municipal government. Ironically, however, this power turned out to be a structural weakness that ensured the opposition's success. The Dujiangyan Management Bureau carried out the orders of the Sichuan Water Resources Bureau, a strong supporter of Yangliuhu. But within Dujiangyan itself, it was largely isolated in its support for Yangliuhu. At the municipal level, the Dujiangyan government and its functional offices tightened the noose around the Dujiangyan Management Bureau. At the same time, the framing of the issue in the press worked both directly and indirectly to pick off potential allies at the provincial level. Yangliuhu opponents recruited the support of the provincial Bureau of Construction and the media outlets through appeals to their own organizational mandates by providing an opportunity for the Bureau of Construction to break ranks and demonstrate its independence (or prowess) and by providing an irresistible story for the media outlets that helped them in their goals. Finally, the Dujiangyan municipal government relished the opportunity to set back the Dujiangyan Management Bureau, an office that fell outside its jurisdiction in substantive policy issues but that had traditionally siphoned off potential revenues from the Dujiangyan government.

Without support at the provincial level, the Dujiangyan Management Bureau was surrounded, isolated, and ultimately defeated. In interviews Dujiangyan officials spoke about the Sichuan Water Resources Bureau with respect and apprehension, but they spoke about the Dujiangyan Management Bureau with thinly disguised contempt.

## Conclusion

Public policies sometimes change dramatically, and the events that mark the turning points in these policies are extremely important. How do such events occur? Turning points in long-standing policies occur when entrepreneurs take advantage of opportunities to expand the sphere of conflict over policy goals to bring in supportive members of the audience through the use of the media and the creation of advocacy coalitions across different sectors in society and vertical lines of government. How comparable are such events in different national political settings? In the three cases of dams that were not built at the Grand Canyon, on the Franklin River, and at Dujiangyan, the dynamics were quite similar.

While such events are significant, two qualifications regarding Dujiangyan should be made. First, Dujiangyan involved historical as well as environmental values. Without the historical significance of the irrigation system, concerns about the environment might not have been enough to stop the Yangliuhu Dam. However, the environmental concerns about the ecosystem in general were crucial. Further, the historical significance of sites in the Grand Canyon and on the Franklin River was also important, but the significance of the outcomes for environmental causes was not thereby diminished. It is not only difficult to disentangle historical preservation from environmental preservation or restoration, but also illogical. Many decisions to preserve or restore ecosystems are motivated by ecological and historical values.

Second, and more important, the designation of cases as seminal can be done only in retrospect. The successful efforts to stop the dams in the Grand Canyon and at the Franklin River without question launched the modern environmental movements in the United States and Australia. The future history of environmental policy in China following the aborted dam at Dujiangyan is less certain for at least two reasons. First, the decision to stop the dam occurred only very recently. Second, pressures for economic growth in China will continue to present large obstacles to true environmental progress for years to come. Nevertheless, the decision at Dujiangyan was dramatic, surprising, and visible. Subsequent debates over environmental issues in China, notably over dams on the Nu and Jinsha rivers in Yunnan, suggest that the Chinese have turned a corner in this policy area.<sup>42</sup> If nothing else, questions about the potential environmental impacts of large dams and other structures are now on China's political agenda, and decisions to stop such projects will no longer be without precedent.

## NOTES

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28. Interview 04DJY02 and 04DJY03, August 26, 2004.
29. Interview 04DJY01, August 5, 2004.
30. The construction bureaucracy is a relatively new bureaucracy and is preoccupied with increasing its administrative power, much like the Quality Technical Supervision Bureaucracy. Interview 04BJ01, August 2, 2004. It strategically picks its battles on those issues for which it stands to gain something politically as well as substantively. Reservoirs tend to flood areas where roads and other infrastructure projects can be built. The construction bureaucracy does not have a hand in dam construction.
31. A pseudonym.
32. *Baohu shijie wenhua yichan, fandui xiujian Yangliuhu shuiku* [Protect World Heritage Sites, Oppose the Construction of the Yangliuhu Reservoir], Internal Document, Dujiangyan Municipal Cultural Relics Bureau, December 22, 2003.
33. Interview 04DJY02, August 26, 2004.
34. Another exception that proves the general rule and is similar to the Yangliuhu debate is the way in which the SARS issue was able to break through official government announcements through the efforts of individuals such as Jiang Yanyong and the Chinese (and foreign) media.
35. There is a similar structure in Guizhou Province. Interview 05GY04, July 11, 2005.
36. In everyday terms, the Dujiangyan Management Bureau has jurisdiction over a thirty meter area on each side of the river. Thus, the restaurants that line the Min River must pay rent to both the Dujiangyan Management Bureau and the Dujiangyan government (and they apparently pay much more to the Dujiangyan Management Bureau). Interviews 04DJY02, 04DJY03, and 04DJY04, August 25, 2004.
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38. Interview 05KM03, April 28, 2005.
39. Dai Qing, *Yangtze! Yangtze!* (London: Earthscan, 1994).
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